Future archeologists explore Kenai Peninsula's past

by Rachel Belouin

Within the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, just a stone's throw away from combat fishing on the Russian River, a group of young campers aided by professional archeologists spent the summer learning the stories and history of the Dena'ina (Athabaskan) and Kachemak Tradition (Eskimo) peoples. This group of campers from the Kenaitze camp in Cooper Landing spent three weeks practicing the ways of archeologists as they uncovered artifacts and structures that belonged to early Russian River fishermen five hundred to two thousand years ago. This past summer I had a chance to spend a day with this group of campers and their counselors.

When I first arrived at the site, several hundred yards back from the bank overlooking the Kenai River, I found a hard working crew of campers and archeologists. Some were in the excavation pit, digging and scraping soil and rock with trowels into blue plastic buckets. The pit itself was not large, but separate rooms were distinguishable. Other campers were dumping the scraped earth into a large screen and sifting through the blackened soil looking for the smallest artifacts, while several campers and counselors worked on bagging and labeling their new finds. I was greeted with excited smiles and hellos as the campers came to tell stories of their different discoveries. Debbie Corbett, project leader and US Fish and Wildlife archeologist, patiently guided me through the project's history and accomplishments. This particular endeavor began three years ago when the Kenaitze camp for native children and the US Forest Service started a partnership to involve native children in activities within the Chugach Mountains and surrounding areas. Native Kenaitze children are given first preference to be camp participants, but Corbett assured me that no one has been turned down and that there has been a good mix of native and non-native kids attending the camp. Camper ages range from 12 to 18 years old, and sometimes a bit younger. For three weeks the campers are exposed to cultural experiences, learn about natural resources, and participate in an overall broad resource experience. Approximately half of the campers return each year.

As part of their work, the campers had to dig, record, sift, and ensure that all artifacts were accurately recorded. The campers also spent time working at the Kenaitze Tribe interpretive site where they made a catalog of artifacts with labels and full descriptions. The campers learned how to recognize artifacts and seemed very adept at finding and identifying fragments of bone. They also became skilled in recognizing changes in soil color and texture that indicated postholes and fire pits. As I watched the junior archeologists scurrying about the dig site, I was impressed by how assured the kids were of their tools and knowledge of how to properly dig and sort through the dark black soil. They often interrupting my conversation with Corbett to present a possible artifact, some smaller than their tiniest finger. Others were hollering to proudly point out where they had discovered the remains a fire pit and to show their knowledge that the dark black soil color was caused by charcoal. According to Corbett, three levels have been identified and dated within the pit, ranging from about 500 to 2000 years in age. The first level is 500 to 800 years old and has revealed copper, obsidian, and black slate beads, as well as old fireplaces and postholes that Corbett believes were part of a structure for smoking and drying fish.

The second level, 1000 years old, has yielded a lens of black charcoal soil, boulder spalls for processing fish, fire-cracked rock, scrapers, and worked slate. One boy in his second year on the dig explained that fire-cracked rock is rock which was heated up in fires and then put in baskets to heat food or to use for steam baths. Level two has also revealed bones, most of which were burnt. A lab in Vancouver has identified these bones and the kids reported excitedly that some of the bones were from two sizes of salmon, rockfish from salt water, various ducks, cormorants, and marmots. Corbett believes that level two may mark the Dena'ina's first arrival on the Peninsula.

The third level, where the campers were currently digging, has turned up numerous artifacts, including net sinkers which are characteristic of the Kachemak Tradition people. That evening, well after I had left the dig, Corbett and several of the campers excitedly sought me out to show me a spear point that they had

found late that same afternoon. It was six inches long and made from ground slate. I was thrilled to hold it and I could tell by the brightness of the eyes around me, that I was not the only one feeling a connection with a long ago time. According to Corbett this artifact, very characteristic of Eskimo and Kachemak peoples, gives every indication that this was a 2000-year-old Kachemak single family home, not a potlatch or meeting house as originally thought.

Part of the learning process for the campers and archeologists is the time spent back at camp with discussions, questions, and making crafts with native tools and methods. Informal discussions with the kids lead to many questions about the Dena'ina and their way of life and beliefs. Trade and connections between the different peoples have sparked great interest, as have discussions about rivers and floods.

Not only were the kids digging up artifacts, they were also making some of their own. Using traditional native methods and hand tools the campers created jewelry and learned how to start fires with bow drills. I watched the kids sitting with stone tools hammering and chipping away, laughing and enjoying their chance at creativity in the ancient way. The kids were also required to contribute to the final yearly report on the dig. Some entries included drawings, stories and poems. Corbett enjoyed pointing out the quality of imagination and talent with which each camper had engineered his or her project.

Though I spent only a few hours with the campers and archeologists, I went home that night with a growing awareness of the Alaska I had come to enjoy during my summer's work. I have begun to learn the stories of the people that have made the Kenai Peninsula home. In spending time with the campers I realized that I had been watching some of them learning firsthand about their families and ancestors. It was as if they were opening up scrapbooks and picture albums for the first time. For those campers and archeologists with no family ties, they too found inspiration in the thrill of discovery and the adventure it provided. I remember well seeing the campers and waving good-by to them later in the summer, as they left on their last day, bound for Homer to bring their artifacts, cataloged and labeled, to the Pratt Museum for all of us to see and enjoy in the future.

Rachel Belouin is a senior at the University of Massachusetts majoring in outdoor recreation. She participated as a volunteer Student Conservation Association Resource Assistant on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge during the 2000 summer season. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at http://kenai.fws.gov.